

By MIKE WHITESMAN: Sutton United 0, Wycombe Wanderers 1

FORMER Sutton United hero, Larry Pritchard returned in triumph to Gander Green Lane on Saturday, adding the goalscoring touch that all but ends Wycombe Wanderers' impatient 14-year wait between Isthmian League titles. Only an extreme pessimist would deny them the crown now.

Sutton, one game to play (home to Tooting on Tuesday, April 27), could yet equal Wanderers on 61 points. But by then it should all be over. Wycombe need only draw at Oxford City on Thursday evening to make 100 per cent sure. And there's the closing match against Ilford at Loakes Park on Saturday, May 1, acting as additional security.

At full time, jubilant Wanderers' fans forgot the mathematical formalities still involved and gathered in front of the main stand to pay Brian Lee and his squad well deserved homage.

Waving scarves and chanting "we are the champions," they hailed Wycombe's position at the Isthmian summit for the first time since Sid Cann took them there in 1957.

But out of the sunshine, in shadows reserved annually for the runners up, stood that same man, this time on the losing end of a campaign stretching back to last August.

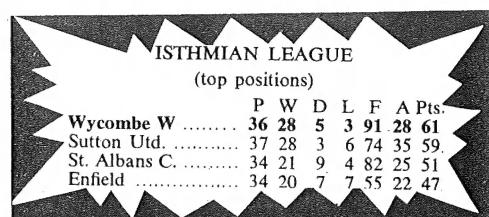
For Cann, with half a seven-season contract as Sutton manager still to run, it was a reminder of the bitterness and heartache entailed in reaching so far, for so very little.

How well his Wanderers' counterpart, Brian Lee, must know the feeling, after being pipped at the post by Enfield in 1970.

With so much at stake, passions ran high, and some dubious decisions by referee Turvey added fuel to the furnace inside the ground, where three thousand watched the championship duel reach its climax.

Tension was evident in both sides' football, and a strong wind plus the difficult playing surface, helped to emphasise the point with every movement.

Wycombe's tendency in recent seasons has been to fall back onto defence for any vital game. They followed suit to



somewhat again on Saturday. But this time there was ample justification for the tactic — Sutton, despite their 4-0 drubbing at Loakes Park last August, demanded the greatest respect.

For Cann's men, it was like playing Russian roulette—one false move and you're dead. How ironic that a one-time Sutton star should complete the funeral arrangements.

Wycombe brought three former United men with them. Ted Powell of course came to Loakes Park along with Pritchard. Keith Blunt had done some more extensive roaming in recent seasons before settling at Wycombe though.

Each played a vital role in his own right. Pritchard, an erratic player form-wise this term, provided more problems than any of his colleagues to the tight-packed home back line. Meanwhile Powell kept Wycombe active in the middle and Sutton hopes of attacking on the wings were literally "Blunted."

Only that seasoned campaigner Trevor Bladon penetrated to any degree, and with extra support could have emerged a match winner. For Sutton buzzed threateningly and often in front of Wycombe's defence without convincing they were capable of a goal.

Chris Kelly could, however, complain that fortune deserted him. One by one, Mr. Turvey's more controversial rulings

seemed to centre around the Sutton number 11, who made small attempt to hide his frustration.

By the incredibly high standard they have set themselves, Wycombe fell short of their best. It is possible to recall at least one match for every month of the season to date, in which they have played better.

Neither side let their opponents relax for a minute. Breathing space was of a premium as tight marking ruled out the possibility of a free flowing encounter.

Instead the football was fast, without compromise and very involved even down to Sutton's last-gasp bid for an equaliser. But it most definitely wasn't a classic.

The blatant lack of fresh ideas shown by the rival forward lines served as a reflection on nine hard months of combat. Pritchard and Bladon led the way, both with inventive displays.

Yet Wycombe's back four, warmly welcoming the return of skipper John Delaney and Paul Fuschillo, proved the major factor in swinging the argument their way.

If Delaney, like Fuschillo, was less than fully fit, nonetheless his towering heading qualities reigned supreme as Sutton tried pumping the ball down centre field at every opportunity.

But man of many onlookers' match was Ian Rundle, a fraction slow, a fraction awkward, yet working with precision and 101 per cent effort as Delaney's twin centre half.

Rundle typified the refusal of Wanderers' defence to give ground. Collectively they produced a rare determination upon which the result, and it seems the championship, hinged.

Nursing a damaged hand, John Maskell found trouble in controlling the ball as well as usual, yet saved Wanderers twice in the first half. He cut out a dangerous cross off the right wing, ultimately cleared by Delaney in the 8th minute. And 12 minutes later, a header from Bladon looked a certain goal, before the keeper responded splendidly to palm the ball away as it seemed to be tucking itself inside the post.

But, the visitors were always in the picture and almost went ahead in the 40th minute as Searle, who earlier had tried a tricky shot into Bone's arms, now found himself free to the left on the net, but shot across the line.

Two minutes later, came the moment of reckoning. The ball flew into Sutton's 'box', where a group of players hustled and barged for positions before Pritchard worked himself a clear line at goal.

One up, Wanderers looked all the better for their advantage during the second period. Gradually they grew quicker on and off the ball than their opponents, who were committed to risking further setbacks in their search for an equaliser.

Sutton just had to win, yet,

all their advantage faded once they moved within striking distance of Maskell's net.

Sutton came to life to force five corners in seven minutes as time began to run out on them.

The substitution of Horseman with Hutchinson caused a brief interlude when Mr. Turvey seemed to misconstrue Wycombe manager's move to the touchline, as illegal coaching. But when all was sorted out, the scene lay set for the last eight minutes — when a title was to be won or lost.

Delaney conceded one of those corners when Kelly's centre seemed destined to find Ken Jelly. And Wanderers' net survived again two minutes later as Waughman blazed the ball over the bar from a range close enough to make Kelly nod his head in disbelief at the miss for several seconds afterwards.

Wycombe remained steadfast to hold both points and complete a league "double" — an achievement which in itself, must justify them the Isthmian crown.

SUTTON UNITED: G. Bone, R. Taylor, C. Booth, R. Brookes, R. Peck, K. Grose, T. Bladon, K. Jelly, T. Waughman, W. Smith, C. Kelly, Sub.: P. Crees (not used).

WCOWME WANDERERS: J. Maskell, P. Fuschillo, I. Rundle, E. Powell, J. Delaney, I. R. Riddle, B. Bremer, B. Baker, K. Searle, L. Pritchard, A. Horseman (Sub.: J. Hutchinson, 72 mins.).

Referee: Mr. A. C. Turvey.

Attendance: Approx. 3,000.

Half - time: 0-1. Goalscorer:

Wycombe — Pritchard (42).